

## **Vermont Secondary Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: *Ensuring Each Student Can Succeed in College, Career and Citizenship***

As indicated by recent discussions led and attended by the Vermont State Board of Education, “...it is clear we need to transform our education system so our children will be prepared for the world that awaits them.” (*How Are the Children? A Step toward the Transformation of Education in Vermont*. October 2007). Through conversations with the various constituents, it appears that there is broad agreement about what we all want for a transformed education system in Vermont. While the transformation our State Board proposes encompasses all of Vermont’s schools, the purpose of this document is to describe what the state vision for transformation might mean for Vermont’s secondary schools. This document takes that vision to the next step: implementation.

As the State Board describes, “Vermont’s education system has a lengthy history of accomplishments of which we can all be proud.” And as indicated below, it is possible to cite numerous examples of Vermont secondary school initiatives that advance the vision described by the Board and most constituent groups. At the same time, we can observe the drivers of change to our society: technological advances, transition to a more global economy and society, shifts in needed job skills, changing demographics and instant access to information. We can also see the data pointing to the need for continued transformation. This document, crafted and influenced by many, can provide the road map for how we implement Vermont’s vision for transforming education as it applies specifically to Vermont’s secondary schools.

In 2002, the Vermont Department of Education released the 12 principles of *High Schools on the Move* (HSOM). These principles continue to form the philosophical foundation for improving outcomes for secondary students in Vermont. Our proposed strategies link back to HSOM principles such as *engaged learners; challenging standards; flexible structures; multiple pathways; real life experiences* and *personalized learning*. We have simply attempted to update many of these concepts for 2008. During the 2005-2006 commissioner visits to each high school and technical center, we learned that many schools are working to transform the 12 principles into improved school practices. We observed ninth -grade academies; career academies; professional learning communities; student advisories; thematic and project-based instruction; team teaching; extended class schedules; use of houses and small learning communities; more rigorous curriculum expectations; formative assessment; literacy programs; more effective use of data, and many other initiatives. Yet individual high schools and technical centers tend to be making isolated changes and are implementing only one or two of these new practices, though still within the traditional high school system. We found no school that had yet accomplished systemic transformation. In fact, many teachers and school leaders expressed fatigue and frustration trying to manage too many separate change initiatives.

While all Vermont high schools have success with some students, most high schools have sub-groups who are not meeting the standards. In 2006, while 91 percent of our non-poverty students graduated with their peers in four years, only 71 percent of those in poverty did so. Both National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) results show similar poverty vs. non-poverty disparities, with the NECAP high school results showing especially wide discrepancy. The National Center for Education Statistics also reports that high school seniors’ view of school relevance dropped substantially over the period of 1983-2000, with only 21 percent viewing courses as interesting to them. ([http://ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/technology/plan/2004/site/docs\\_and\\_pdf/john\\_netp\\_12503.pdf](http://ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/technology/plan/2004/site/docs_and_pdf/john_netp_12503.pdf)).

State and local district policies are needed to focus more cohesive statewide and schoolwide efforts to redefine 21<sup>st</sup> century outcomes and practices for Vermont's secondary education system. Many schools asked for stronger, statewide coordination and support that could assist their local efforts. Therefore, the Department of Education has drafted a set of strategies that research suggests could be most critical to ensuring that all secondary students graduate with the knowledge and skills essential for 21<sup>st</sup> century success in college, careers and citizenship.

Our design includes five strategic areas, all aligned with the State Board of Education's vision:

- I. **Student Competency for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:** Competence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will look different than it did in the past. Thomas Friedman describes a “flattened world” that requires successful citizens to expect change, become entrepreneurial, and abandon the 20<sup>th</sup> century definition of “career”. In addition to an expanded array of skills, students need to demonstrate their mastery of those skills in a variety of ways.
- II. **21st Century Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment:** Research shows that students learn best in challenging learning environments that have relevance to them and that engage them mentally and physically. Promoting true inquiry and hands-on/minds-on opportunities will be the hallmark of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.
- III. **Student Support System:** The student support system is integral to a school learning environment where all students can succeed with challenging academics, make informed choices about their goals and manage their own learning options. Students are supported in their academic, career and personal/social development. The effectiveness of a school's student support system is measured by the success of their students.
- IV. **Support for Teachers and School Leaders:** Envisioning a future that is not based on the past presents significant challenges to teachers and administrators. While many educators support the idea that secondary schools must transform to better meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, professionals in each school must determine what transformation actually means for them and their school. This work must be ongoing, comprehensive and collaborative, and the critical role for leadership cannot be underestimated. Transformation cannot be achieved in isolation, and requires that professionals model the concept of “lifelong learning” as they seek to understand and implement 21<sup>st</sup> century learning models.
- V. **Policy and Use of Data to Drive Improvement:** Large systems tend to resist change and then move slowly when change is required. New or amended policies, creative use of new and evolving data systems, and a philosophy that change (and improvement) is constant must strongly influence secondary school transformation initiatives.

### **Strategic Area I: Student Competency for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Strategies include:

- **21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Expectations** – Building from the Vermont Grade Level Expectations (<http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pubs/framework.html>), national standards and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Partnership skills model (<http://21stcenturyskills.org>), the Department of Education, local districts and other key stakeholders prioritize the core academic and non-academic standards all students should accomplish to be prepared for college, careers and citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- **Competency-based Credits** – High schools and technical centers identify the highest order learning outcomes (core learning standards) for each course or independent

learning experience offered or approved through the school, describe appropriate ways to assess competency, and define sufficient evidence for students to demonstrate mastery. Academic credit is awarded based on student demonstration of competence.

- ***Competency-based Transcripts*** – High schools and technical centers develop and implement competency-based grading and transcripts that report student mastery of core learning standards.
- ***Competency-based Graduation Requirements*** – The Department of Education, local districts and other key stakeholders define new graduation requirements designed to demonstrate competency in 21<sup>st</sup> century learning expectations.

## **Strategic Area II: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment**

Strategies include:

- ***Alignment to Competency Graduation Requirements*** – All students have genuine access to a rigorous program of study, including career and technical education, that engages individual goals/interests and provides full and legitimate opportunities to master and demonstrate competency graduation requirements.
- ***Teachers as Learning Facilitators*** – Teachers transition toward an instructional model that stresses coaching, mentoring and facilitating student learning. They question and stimulate student thinking and self-study. Teachers challenge students to take active responsibility for their own learning and to reflect on what they know, what they still need to learn and how they might learn it. They design and instruct using carefully constructed learning investigations where students learn through inquiry, research and experience.
- ***21st Century Learning Contexts*** – Flexible schedules, technology and teaching practices support students to learn in collaboration and through relevant, real-world applications and experiences. Students engage with real-world information, data, tools and community/world experts as they conduct research, complete meaningful projects and solve problems. Learning is not dependent on time or location. High quality and extended learning experiences outside the school walls (e.g. internships; early college experiences; service learning; special projects; business experiences; distance learning) are equally important to student learning as classroom-based courses.
- ***Schoolwide Learning across the Curriculum*** – Each discipline integrates the learning of interdisciplinary skills required for graduation (e.g., information, communication and technology (ICT) literacy; creativity; critical thinking and problem-solving; communication and collaboration; adaptability; leadership). Schoolwide rubrics and/or other mechanisms are adopted and guide cross-curricular instruction and assessment. Teachers assigned to the same students jointly review and discuss student work and plan instructional strategies to increase student skill levels.
- ***Assessment for Learning*** – Student learning is supported with a balanced array of assessments that emphasize useful formative feedback embedded into everyday learning and summative feedback documenting skill levels at key points in the program of study. When appropriate, schools include third-party feedback from community members or “customers” of student work and link summative assessments to external credentials and post-secondary requirements.

### **Strategic Area III: Student Support System**

Strategies include:

- ***Scaffold Literacy Program*** – The ability to locate, read, analyze and learn from text is one of the most critical skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Each high school and technical center designs and operates a scaffold literacy program that ensures that information literacy is a cross-curricular learning expectation for all students. Students who fall below grade level proficiency in literacy are provided with focused and intensive literacy instruction so they can attain proficiency in information literacy and improve their success in all school and lifelong learning.
- ***Personalization of Learning*** – Each student needs to feel known, safe and valued at school. *Personalized relationships* with teachers and peers connect the student to their school community. Schools create environments that facilitate relationship-building, such as student advisories; small learning communities of teachers and students who work together for an extended duration; parental involvement and communication; a school culture that encourages student voice and leadership, and a facilities design that encourages community building. Each student needs to feel that secondary education is relevant to their own life goals, interests, talents and learning styles. *Personalized education plans* customize learning strategies and schedules based on analysis of who the student is as a whole person. What knowledge and skills need to be mastered for graduation remains constant, but HOW a student can best acquire them is tailored to the unique circumstances of each student. Parents, educators and students work together to determine the learning pathway where each student can flourish.
- ***Comprehensive School Guidance*** – Guidance and counseling services are proactive in design and support all students. Services include guidance curriculum, individual education, post-secondary and career planning/development, and responsive services. Ideally, time and resources for school guidance are distributed equally across these three service areas.
- ***Whole Community Involvement*** – To ensure that each student has the option of engaging in quality learning experiences, including service learning, the school harnesses all worthwhile community resources, including parents; businesses; organizations; talented individuals and natural resources.

### **Strategic Area IV: Support for Teachers & School Leaders**

Strategies include:

- ***Professional Standards*** – Effective teaching standards and effective school leadership standards are defined and adopted for Vermont Secondary Education. Licensing; educator contracts; performance evaluation practices; educator preparation programs and professional development plans are aligned with the adopted standards.
- ***Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)*** – Each school's culture and work processes support professional learning communities for staff to work collaboratively and regularly at improving outcomes for all secondary education students. Required supports include identification and formation of specific PLCs within the school, common planning time to enable frequent and ongoing work of PLCs, training and consultation in the operation of PLCs, and accountability/communication structures for PLCs to report on and extend implementation of their work. At another level, administrative professional learning communities support administrators in learning, sharing best practices and solving problems.

- ***Professional Development*** – Focused professional development at the state, school and teacher level explicitly and directly advances the transformation of Vermont secondary schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Professional development plans shall be data-driven in both their formation and in their evaluation of effectiveness in stimulating improvements to practice and student achievement. The context and process for professional development ensure maximum effectiveness by aligning with the National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development. Coordination with higher education, education support agencies and private providers builds consistency of professional development goals to leverage greater systemic change.
- ***Professional Networks for 21st Century High Schools*** – State-facilitated exchanges between schools and extended technical assistance by school coaches support progress. Such opportunities as principal partnerships; “sister school” partnerships; Web-based clearinghouses; teacher partnerships; a Vermont Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Secondary Schools and others will support educators in this work.

## **Strategic Area V: Policy and Use of Data to Drive Improvement**

Strategies include:

- ***State Policy*** – To direct and drive Vermont toward 21<sup>st</sup> century secondary schools, the Vermont State Board of Education establishes specific policy and accountability processes that target implementation of these components and strategies. These policy and accountability processes are embedded within existing school rules and regulations, (i.e., School Quality Standards; action planning; New England Association of Schools and Colleges and data reporting) to the fullest extent possible.
- ***District Policy*** – Districts adopt relevant local policy and processes to direct and drive their local efforts to build 21<sup>st</sup> century schools (e.g., new competency-based graduation policy; policy for a scaffolded literacy program; professional development policy).
- ***Measuring Progress*** – Vermont educators, stakeholders and partners define measures for secondary education student outcomes and critical school practices. This is the performance matrix for tracking and reporting on our progress toward creating 21<sup>st</sup> century secondary schools that ensure every student can succeed in college, careers and citizenship.
- ***Continuous Improvement*** – Schools, staff and students routinely and effectively use a wide range of data from multiple sources to assess and improve their own learning and performance which are aligned to other initiatives, i.e., School Quality Standards, etc.

We will convene groups of Vermont educators to collectively refine and improve these draft strategies for 21<sup>st</sup> century secondary schools. We will also work to build broad-based political and fiscal support for transforming secondary schools, and to provide technical assistance and policy leadership for schools to systemically implement the strategies in the ways that best fit with their local goals, culture and opportunities. These are not a “cookie cutter” model for 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. No two strong secondary schools need to look alike. The purpose of the five strategies is to give the state and schools a blueprint and accountability structure for re-inventing secondary education.

For more information on Transformation of Vermont Education visit  
<http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/dept/transformation.html>.